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# Laukitis, Sally Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Oral History Interview  
History of the Convention and Visitors Bureau of Holland  
Interviewee: Sally Laukitis  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
September 4, 2002

GR: Sally, tell me a little bit about your background in Holland, where you grew up, and how you got involved in the Convention Bureau.

SL: I grew up in Holland. I graduated from Holland High School, and then left the community—went away to college out of state. After I graduated, I joined the airline and didn't come back to Holland for close to twenty years. I moved back in 1986, mainly for quality of life reasons. As a single mom with two young kids, it seemed like the perfect place to raise my children because I had always liked the values of this community. So, I moved back in '86, and I worked a couple of different jobs. Then in 1992, I went and talked to Kristi Van Howe, who was the director of both Tulip Time and the Convention Bureau. I had known Kristi growing up. I had a conversation with her, and it turned out that they were looking for a group salesperson. So, I went to work for Tulip Time and the Convention Bureau together. In fact, when Kristi ran the Bureau and Tulip Time, she answered to two boards of directors, and everyone that worked in that office was employed by both organizations. I was considered like a 75% Convention Bureau employee and 25% Tulip Time employee. In essence, the way that office ran, Tulip Time was so all-encompassing that essentially I was probably an 80% Tulip Time employee. So when I came, I was the group salesperson and then I took over the step-on guide program. The step-on guides are Dutch costumed guides that we put through a training program involving the history of Holland, going back to when Van Raalte came in 1847, the fire. We mapped out a two to three hour motor coach route around the city of

Holland, and we would sell these step-on guides, as it were, to the motor coaches when they came into town for Tulip Time, as well as for year-round tours. So, I ran that program, and that was really fun. I learned a lot there about the community. We also worked with Charles Conrad, who had the Ludington car ferry, who was from Holland, and he wanted to start doing tours on Lake Michigan. So we had these little tours called the Winken, Blinken, and Nod tours. Charles Conrad and Kristi Van Howe put those together, and we worked with Diane Feenstra from Holland High School, who at that point was head of the speech department, and Kevin Schneider, who is the theatre and forensics guy, and we used Holland High School kids. We involved Randy Vande Water from Holland and a lot of people that have a real working knowledge of the history of Holland, and we put together a tour on this old—it was just this old, big boat—and if the weather was bad, we put a school bus on it, and we put the people onboard the bus and had a high school guide telling the history of the lakeshore. That was kind of fun, so we did that. We ran that for two Tulip Times. In '94 the Convention Bureau and Tulip Time separated, and in November of '94 I began as director of the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

GR: Why did that change take place?

SL: It took place because it was very, very difficult for one director to answer to two boards of directors. It just seemed that the Convention and Visitors Bureau side of things was not getting the amount of attention, and we weren't able to promote Holland as a year-round destination because we were so involved in promoting, at that point, the ten days of the Tulip Time Festival. So a decision was made, purely from a tourism standpoint and to fill the hotel rooms. We separated in '94, and the Tulip Time office and staff stayed in

the train depot, and the Convention and Visitors Bureau moved to the 100 East Eighth Street building, which was owned by Hope College at that point. We set up offices there, and we stayed there for two years. Then in '96 we moved into downtown Holland, into this store here.

GR: Was there a reason for that?

SL: A couple of things. This building became available; we were in a very, very small office at the 100 East building. Here we had almost 2,000 square feet of storage space in the basement, as well as storefront and display windows. So this just made a lot of sense, plus the rent was cheaper.

GR: Tell me about your part in that. You're hired because of the split...what are some of the challenges that you found right off the bat?

SL: Right off the bat, the biggest challenge was that I had three days to move. So I packed up all of the records, and I moved into offices. I had no staff at that point, so I was operating out of an office with three banquet tables brought up from the Holiday Inn, with white tablecloths, and three brown rotary dial phones, and no computers, no fax machines. Absolutely nothing. So the first order of business was to hire an additional staff person, which I did. She stayed with me for probably six or eight months. Within about two months I had an office set up with computers, fax machines, a copy machine, printer, all of those things we needed, and I actually had office furniture. Every year, I was able to add another employee. It was interesting, I had hired a friend of mine from high school—Mary Jo (Shashaguay) Pete—who most recently had worked at Holland Hitch. In fact, she was my Dutch Dance partner. She became my right-hand person. It was a great working relationship.

[tape malfunction]

GR: You were telling me about the back window.

SL: Right, we have a back display case that was just built. The office is open on Saturdays for eight months out of the year. We have brochure racks back there, but we are closed on Sundays when a lot of people are in town. So in the back we put a locator map of Holland with all the hotels, obviously we're hotel driven. The front windows have been really fun. We have a staff meeting and planning retreat and we talk about what it is we can promote in the front windows. We maintain, actually, a calendar of events for the entire community. So we look at events that are coming up. Right now we have the Welcome Back Hope Students window, which is great, and we also have our Dozen Distinctive Destinations award in the other window. We did not plan to have that window, but when we won the award...so obviously there's flexibility there. We will have a window promoting Tulipanes, and we had one promoting Hope Summer Rep. During Tulip Time we have a window that promotes Holland throughout the other seasons. So if there's a special exhibit going on—the Art Council has displayed in the past—we have biking brochures and fishing brochures, so we have biking and fishing windows. Anything that we can promote, not only for visitors coming to town that may just sort of click and say, “Oh, this is fun; this is something I can do that I didn't think about,” but also for the community, because I think that a lot times when you live in a community, you get caught up in your own little world and you tend to forget that Lake Michigan may be seven miles out to the west, or there are over a hundred miles of bike trails in the western Ottawa County area, that there's great cross country skiing up at Pigeon Creek on groomed, lighted trails. You know, those sorts of things. It's probably

not aesthetically as beautiful as we would like it to, but we display posters of various events going on around town. And we're starting to be sort of a stopping-off point for people as they're strolling down Eighth Street to see what's going on. We always have a weekly calendar of events posted in the front as well.

GR: So there are comments made about the windows?

SL: There are. The window that you did for us—that the archives did for us—with some of the old Hope memorabilia, that was, actually, one of the best windows we've ever had because so many people would stop by and say, "Oh man, I was in that fraternity," "I was part of that class," and that's really fun because it brought a whole different genre of people into our office and stopping by. So we try to think outside of the box a little bit. That was a great window.

GR: I know that you said Tulip Time, but you put the other seasons in the window too?

SL: Right.

GR: What is the goal there?

SL: The goal there is that Holland obviously is a year-round destination. People around the country...just say you're from Holland, and they say, "Oh, I've heard of that; I've heard of Tulip Time." But we have a captive audience during the Tulip Time Festival. We have people from all over the country. And so, we want them to think of Holland as more than just a Tulip Time destination. There are 355 other days in the year, and we would like to have the people come back and enjoy a lot of what we do have.

GR: Since your leaving Tulip Time, have you seen that happen?

SL: We have, and actually it's been interesting. We started tracking historically—obviously we always track our hotel room occupancies—but if we have a particularly good January

or February, which typically are not months that people are coming to Holland, then we do our legwork and start to figure out why. We had a real spike about three years ago in January, February, and March, and it was like, “Wow, this is gangbusters!” It turned out that it was because Consumers Power was doing a refurbishing of the Campbell Power Plant between Holland and Grand Haven, so we had a lot of workmen coming in. We also work the sporting event market; we work with Hope College on a number of events. Right now we’re finding that Holland has become a new destination for hockey tournaments, for soccer tournaments, and those things are filling our hotel rooms during the winter months. We obviously developed Dutch Winterfest as a venue to develop more off-season business. Right now we have some great hotel packages on our website for fall promotion. Once we get people in here, once people come for Tulip Time and they see that there are other things to do here...One of our big selling points obviously is snowmelt in the dead of winter because people are saying, “Why do I want to go to Michigan in the middle of winter?” We have to make a real concerted effort, because Michigan is a state that you either have to make a right or left hand turn to get into. You’re not going to cross through it as you’re driving across America. So we try really hard, once we know those people are in town, to get them to come back at other times and think of us as more than just a Tulip Time community. It’s a fun challenge.

GR: Do you know enough history of the Holland tourist market, or the resort era, to make comparisons? Or is that something you know is so completely different that it doesn’t even matter anymore?

SL: The resurgence of the cruise ships on the Great Lakes obviously is very reminiscent of what was going on at the turn of the century here. When I was growing up here—and

here I'm dating myself—the North American, the South American, and the Alabama, were all docked down at Kollen Park, which was great fun. I have an aunt that's lived up in the hills at Macatawa, has had a place up there since the late '40s, so I've gleaned little bits and pieces of some of the earlier era of tourism in Holland. I have to admit, I wish I knew more. One of the things that this office loves to...there's never a question that we won't find an answer to, and we love that, but when we put together this latest presentation for the Dozen Distinctive Destinations award, which we won from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, we really had to think outside of the box in terms of what it was that made Holland attractive to residents and visitors alike. And it wasn't just the Dutch stuff. We included components about Frank Baum, and the fact that he used to stay in a cottage out at Macatawa, which no longer exists. Of course, the castle out at Castle Park, and Dorothy being a little girl that lived out at Macatawa. I'm fascinated by the old pictures of the old hotels. I do remember the old Macatawa Hotel, I was very young at that point. So there's a whole era there—the water skiing championships out on Lake Macatawa, Getz Farm, and Marigold Estate—just little bits and pieces of those that are a snippet. I think one thing that this office has to do, and has to do better, is really compile some facts on that. I was thinking about that today as I was getting ready for this. I'd really like to do a timeline, which I know is what you're doing, but even just starting with the advent of the Civic Center, the last half of century, from 1954 to now.

GR: When tourism became a huge industry versus... I think everyone will say that Holland has made that transformation from resort to tourist destination. And I think you're right,



the '50s are probably the era that you'll see that happen, with the advent of the highway system, and other things that came along with that.

SL: Back in the early '80s, when the CVB was in its infancy, and even before it was formed, there was a little trailer out on 16<sup>th</sup> Street that said Visitor Information. Hoteliers would take turns staffing it on Saturdays and Sundays. People could stop in and get a Holland brochure.

GR: So there wasn't any active marketing?

SL: The marketing was really purely Tulip Time up until the early '80s. And that's actually when the hotels started being built. It's now the Holland Inn, but the former Holiday Inn was built in the mid-'60s, and then of course when Point West came in, that was, oh my gosh, we thought we'd died and gone to heaven because we had this beautiful new, modern hotel on Lake Macatawa with a wonderful restaurant. I worked there when I was in college, and the boaters would come up from Chicago and they would get out of their boats and have a wonderful dinner. They could either stay on their boat or they could stay at the motel. It was truly a very special time, and if you talked to people that are about my age that grew up in Holland—it seems like everyone, but I know it wasn't—but many, many people worked at Point West during summers from high school and college. It was just such a wonderful...it added a wonderful ambience. Point West has been gone, late '80s, early '90s, but we still get phone calls at least once a week from people wanting to know about Point West and if they can book a reservation.

GR: They can still go look at the old motel unit.

SL: Right, the old side unit. (laughs)

GR: It's keeping the hillside from falling down.

SL: Yeah. But those are fun aspects of Holland.

[rest of tape is blank]